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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YAOUNDE 000103

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SUBJECT: CAMEROONIAN PRESIDENT BIYA TELLS AMBASSADOR HE
PLANS CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Classified By: Ambassador Jane E. Garvey for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e).

¶1. (C) On January 31, Ambassador met for one-and-a-half hours with President Paul Biya, at our request. Biya outlined his plans to change the constitution in March to eliminate term limits. He hoped this would reduce internal friction within his government. He plans to create a Vice President position and hopes to get the Electoral Commission off the ground in anticipation of elections in 2011. He was worried about Cameroon's security situation and appreciated USG mil-mil cooperation. Biya reiterated support for fighting corruption, voicing distrust of a key figure in our cooperation in this area, Francis Dooh Collins. End summary.

Constitutional Change

¶2. (C) Ambassador told Biya that Washington was concerned about the pace and direction of his move to change the constitution to eliminate term limits, noting that the United States viewed term limits and leadership change as healthy for democracy. Biya confirmed that in March he plans to change the constitution to eliminate term limits. His government had become increasingly distracted by internal jockeying for position in anticipation of a succession post-2011, when his mandate was due to expire. The internal battles were preventing the proper functioning of government, he said, adding that Cameroon could not handle three years of campaigning. He feared the military might intervene in such a case. Also in March, he plans to amend the constitution to create a position of Vice President. This was a more significant change than changing term limits, he said, ensuring leadership "if the President dies". The current constitutional arrangement, which in case of his death would cede power to the Speaker of the National Assembly until elections 40 days later, are untenable and could spur military intervention, he said. Biya did not depict the Vice President as his obvious successor or even the party's candidate in 2011. When Ambassador asked if he would run in 2011, Biya said "I don't know if I'll be alive, or a candidate, or if I run, if I will be elected."

¶3. (C) Biya praised US-Cameroon relations and appreciated the attention we give to his country. He asked Ambassador to convey to President Bush his commitment to "move toward democracy". It was important for 2011 elections to be "sincere" (Ambassador interjected "transparent and democratic" and he repeated "sincere"). Biya stressed the importance of creating the Electoral Commission ELECAM this year and giving it independence from any ministry. He

acknowledged the importance of press freedoms, although he thought it was at times abused. Biya was contemplating sending emissaries to Washington, London and Paris to explain his rationale for constitutional change.

Security

¶4. (C) Biya was very concerned about the country's security situation, citing worries about the possible spillover of instability in CAR, Chad, and Sudan and noting the challenges of banditry, especially in the north. He was puzzled by the recent attack against Cameroonian troops in Bakassi, saying an investigation was still ongoing but many of the details - especially the fact that the local commander had ordered weapons to be locked up - were troubling. He noted the many internal forces threatening internal stability, wanting to avoid a situation like Kenya.

¶5. (C) The President repeatedly praised USG security assistance. He had read a January 16 letter from the Ambassador outlining USG mil-mil engagement and showed Ambassador a large dossier of documents he compiled to read up on the subject. He was delighted with our ongoing navy ship visits and the upcoming ACSS maritime security conference, saying he would send many senior officials to attend. He was interested in planned special forces training and looked forward to the late February visit of AFRICOM Commander General Ward. Cameroon wants to participate in peacekeeping operations and is prepared to contribute three battalions of troops but does not have the funds to equip and deploy them, Biya said, though he speculated that Nigeria might be able to help financially.

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¶6. (C) Biya said he would remove several of his generals in the next month, criticizing them as too old and fat. He encouraged us to work with the Israeli colonel assigned to his presidential guard, who he conceded could be difficult but was effective. He clearly did not think highly of Minister of Defense Ze Meka.

U.S. Commercial Interests

¶7. (C) The President said he wanted to encourage U.S. investment and he was aware of the U.S. mining company Hydromine and recent discussions with a US company to manage Camair (Note: PM Inoni told Ambassador just before she went to the Presidency that the GRC hoped to get US company Capital Aerospace to help Camair. End note.)

Corruption

¶8. (C) The President stressed his continuing commitment to combating corruption, which he thought was important to tackle now because it would be more difficult once a "young" president takes his place. He was aware of efforts by the police and ANIF (the GRC's financial crime office) in corruption cases, saying would act on several dossiers in the next month. He was frustrated with corruption in the army and said he did not trust Francis Dooh Collins, whose services were costing too much (note: As reported septel, Collins is the central figure who has been working with the Ministry of Justice, USDOJ and other foreign governments to recover illicit funds overseas. He is also part of a new anti-moneylaundering cell. End note.) Biya was interested in recuperating overseas proceeds from corruption and said it was not necessary to send corrupt officials to jail if they were cooperating with the government and showed remorse. He implied that his highly corrupt former Minister of Finance Abah Abah was cooperating.

Echoes of Other Conversations

¶9. (C) Conversations we have had over the past week with people highly placed in the government offered slight twists on Biya's plans. In a January 28 meeting, Deputy Secretary General of the Presidency, Philemon Yang, told the Ambassador that since 2003, some CPDM "militants" had been advocating changing the presidential term limits. Yang said that Biya thought his comments in the October 2007 France24 interview, in which he said the constitutional issue could wait, would sideline the party "militants" but it did not (Biya, on the other hand, intimated to Ambassador that this interview was not planned and his remarks on the constitution not well thought out). Yang insisted that no decision had been made about a constitutional change and that there would be an open discussion about the matter with the opposition. Yang added that Biya has always "carried himself as someone whose term will end in 2011" and that the oppositions' fears that Biya wants to remain in office for life were "unwarranted". Yang said that the current issue of changing term limits was merely a "procedural" matter which could be handled through Parliament and depicted constitutional change as "part of a package" that would include creating a transparent, independent ELECAM, which he said would be in place before June. Yang emphasized that the President was trying to be "thoughtful" in his actions, mindful of his militant party wing and the lack of a democratic political culture in the country.

¶10. (C) Poloff recently spoke to a close family member with considerable access to Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni who concurred that Biya wanted to use constitutional change as a way to maneuver himself out of office while ensuring the safety and security of his family, ethnic group and the nation. He believed that Biya would change the Constitution in March, create a Vice Presidential position and reduce the Presidential term limit. The source predicted that Biya would hold an extraordinary congress of the CPDM in which he would announce the Vice President. (Note: The CPDM recently announced a "seminar" for all CPDM Section heads to begin on February 7. End Note.) He thought the VP would not be a Beti (the President's ethnic group), a Northerner (many

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northerners are still bitter over the treatment of former President Amadou Ahidjo) or a Bameleke (considered already to be too economically powerful). Instead, he opined, it would be someone from a politically neutral part of the country. The source added that the President would call for elections in the first half of 2009 and then would step down.

¶11. (C) CPDM Parliamentarian and Vice President of the National Assembly Rose Abunaw told us separately in the past week that the President would not wait until the March 2008 Parliamentary Session, but instead would call an extraordinary Parliamentary Session to pass the constitutional amendment in February. Poloff also spoke with Adama Modi, an outspoken CPDM Parliamentarian, who stated that President Biya's primary concern was the safety of his family and nation. He opined that perhaps if Biya were given assurances that there would be no retribution against him, his ethnic group or his family he would leave the Presidency in 2011. Finance Minister Essemi Menyi also confirmed Biya's plans to change the constitution in a discussion with Ambassador this week, saying there were "too many bull elephants" in the government and Biya was trying to reduce the dissonance in his administration.

Comment

¶12. (C) Biya was talkative, engaging and well informed. He spoke of his exercise routines (swimming, walking and biking) and seemed energetic, although his eyes were very bloodshot. It is not clear that he is worn out and seeking an exit any time soon, as many speculate. He was not in a listening mode

on the issue of constitutional change; he offered up his thoughts on all these issues virtually unprompted and appeared to have clearly made up his mind on the term limit issue, despite suggestions by Philemon Yang that the President remains in some way open minded. Biya professes personal affection for President Bush, values our mil-mil relationship, and sees our commercial relationship as a counterbalance to the Chinese, who he appears to distrust. We can hope for (but not bank on) progress on corruption and investment promotion. We will continue efforts to promote political dialogue and democracy building and will speak out about the democratic value of term limits and regular leadership change. However, it is now clearer that we probably have little to no scope to change Biya's mind on extending term limits through a constitutional amendment.

GARVEY